

Draft Compatibility Determination

Use: Sportfishing

Refuge Name: Iowa River Corridor Project, Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuge

Establishing and Acquisition Authorities:

The Iowa River Corridor Project is a partnership between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IADNR), and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The partnership was established in 1993 following the Midwest Flood. Authority for land acquisition is provided under the Emergency Wetland Resources Act of 1986 (P.L. 99-645).

Authority for this partnership is provided under Chapters 107.24 and 107.30, Code of Iowa; the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929 as amended (16 U.S.C. 715-715r); Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act of 1934 (48 Stat. 451), as amended (16 U.S.C. 718 et seq.); the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (708 Stat. 1119), as amended (16 U.S.C. 742a-742j); the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965 (16 U.S.C. 460 et seq.); National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended (16 U.S.C. 668dd – 668ee); the Emergency Wetland Resources Act of 1986 (PL 99-645); the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act of 1994; and the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (PL 105-57).

Refuge Purpose(s):

The partnership focus area is a 45 mile section of the Iowa River floodplain in Tama, Benton, and Iowa Counties that encompasses about 50,000 acres. Within this focus area the Service owns approximately 9,300 acres, managed as a division of Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuge. Under the acquisition authority of the Emergency Wetland Resources Act, the primary purposes of these refuge lands are the conservation of the wetlands of the nation in order to maintain the public benefits they provide and to help fulfill international obligations contained in various migratory bird treaties and conventions.

The 1995 Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact for Land Acquisition in the Iowa River Corridor Project noted four management purposes: (1) Providing habitat for migratory birds and endangered species; (2) Improving the natural diversity of the ecosystem through restoration and protection of floodplain habitat; (3) Providing an alternative to levee reconstruction and reclaiming damaged farmland; and (4) Increasing public opportunities for outdoor recreation, such as hunting or fishing, and environmental education compatible with the preceding purposes.

The 2004 Memorandum of Understanding between the Service and IADNR describes six specific goals for the IRCP: (1) Provide corridor landowners with a broad menu of assistance options that represent sound floodplain management including fee-title and easement acquisition; (2) Manage public lands and easements to provide for the natural diversity and functions of the Iowa River System; (3) Utilize the characteristics of the floodplain to improve the Iowa River water quality for fish and wildlife; (4) Provide an interpretive opportunity to illustrate floodplain system management; (5) Demonstrate and illustrate the economic outcomes of alternative floodplain

management and land uses; and (6) Utilize private and public partnerships to the fullest extent of each agency's resources to accomplish the objectives.

In addition, most refuge lands in the IRCP overlay USDA wetland easements. Hunting and fishing are allowed on those easements.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission:

"The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans."

Description of Use:

What is the use? Allow IRCP visitors to fish the Iowa River and its associated backwaters and wetlands on the refuge for fish species according to state of Iowa seasons and regulations.

Is the use a priority public use? Fishing is a priority public use of the National Wildlife Refuge System under the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997.

Where is the use conducted? Sportfishing for certain species is an existing use that occurs throughout the IRCP on Service fee title land, adjacent federal easement property, state land, and private property. The IRCP lies within the state's Otter Creek and Coralville Wildlife Management Units.

How would the use be conducted? Length, bag, and possession limits and harvest methods for authorized species are consistent with State of Iowa regulations, except when more restrictive refuge regulations apply. Fishing is allowed under statewide regulations for the following species: Black bass, bluegill, crappie, pumpkinseed, catfish, frogs, muskellunge, mussels, northern pike, paddlefish, shovelnose sturgeon, trout, yellow bass, white bass, rock bass, walleye (and sauger), yellow perch and all other fish except endangered species. Not all of the preceding species are found in the IRCP reach of the Iowa River. Currently 100% of the IRCP is open to fishing for these species.

When is the use conducted? Season dates; length, bag, and possession limits, and harvest methods are consistent with state regulations, with a few refuge-specific regulations. Dates and times vary depending on species. That information is available at <http://www.iowadnr.gov/fish/regulations/iafshregs.html>

Why is the use being proposed? Fishing is a priority general public use of the Refuge System that is also an important wildlife management tool. The Service recognizes fishing as a healthy, traditional outdoor pastime, deeply rooted in the American heritage (USFWS 2006). Fishing can instill a unique understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife, their behavior, and their habitat needs. Fishing programs can promote understanding and appreciation of natural resources and their management on lands and waters in the Refuge System. Fishing is an existing use on the IRCP, and was determined a compatible use on several divisions of Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuge in 2005. In order to promote consistent regulation of fishing across the IRCP partner lands and private lands, a fishing plan and environmental assessment have been prepared. There was no opening package completed for fishing when these lands were acquired.

Availability of Resources:

The areas open to sportfishing are open in accordance with state and refuge regulations and do not require preparation and administration of special events. Fishing visitation to the IRCP has not been estimated or recorded. Crowding has not been an issue as sufficient resources appear to exist to accommodate the current level of participation and provide a quality fishing experience. Law enforcement is provided by the DNR conservation officers for those counties, as well as a USFWS refuge officer located at Neal Smith NWR.

Anglers use the existing network of roads to access areas open to fishing. They can also access the river by boat or canoe. Parking lots, boat ramps, restrooms, leaflets, information kiosks, and signs are provided by the Iowa DNR and refuge for recreational users. The refuge also provides staff and volunteers to maintain these facilities and disseminate information to visitors. Additional parking lots and boat ramps are provided by other agencies, local units of government, or private interests. Anglers residing next to the refuge boundary are often able to access the Iowa River from their property.

Adequate resources are available to manage the existing fishing activity at the current level of participation. Additional funds would be required to expand or improve facilities.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

Short-term impacts: As an ongoing activity throughout the IRCP, accommodating this wildlife-dependent use is expected to result in minimal impacts. Although fishing causes mortality to fish, season dates and bag limits are set with the long-term health of fish populations in mind. Populations of certain species, for example black bass (largemouth and smallmouth) are maintained at sustainable levels through the enforcement of length limits that ensure the maturation to reproductive age of those species. Other species with no length limit, and/or liberal bag and possession limits would be considered locally abundant and harvest would not be expected to adversely affect their overall populations.

Disturbance to wildlife may also result from angling activity. This disturbance is expected to be limited in scope and duration. All motor vehicle use is restricted to designated roads, trails, and parking areas which reduces disturbance to wildlife. Disturbance to habitat is minimal given the nature of this activity, and restriction of vehicle use.

Discarded fishing line and other fishing litter can entangle wildlife and cause injury and death. Additionally, litter impacts the visual experience of refuge visitors. With periodic monitoring of angler access points, trash collection, and installation of monofilament recycling containers, the physical and aesthetic effects of visitor-generated trash can be reduced if not eliminated.

Anglers occasionally violate regulations, such as exceeding the daily bag limit, length limits or possession. However, these incidents are infrequent and usually have only minor impacts to fish populations or Refuge resources.

Long-term impacts: Fishing activities may impact refuges when anglers trample vegetation, create unauthorized trails, or cause erosion of the shorelines. No increases in vegetation damage, trail creation or erosion have been noticed since establishment of the IRCP, therefore no long term effects are anticipated at this time. With maintenance of continued population monitoring by Federal and state agencies, no long-term negative impacts to the Iowa River fishery are anticipated. By maintaining this priority public use over the long term, state and local economic benefits would be expected to be stable or improve.

Cumulative impacts: There are no anticipated cumulative negative impacts. Cumulative positive impacts include increased recreational opportunities for Refuge visitors, and an increased appreciation for floodplain natural resources. Within the entire IRCP area, harvest on the refuge would be limited and would fall within the state's population management goals which are based on the best available information each year. Economic benefits from wildlife-associated recreation, including fishing, are reported every 5 years by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (2011). For Iowa, although the total number of anglers went up from 438,000 to 473,000, total expenditures for fishing decreased slightly from \$288,324,000 in 2006 to \$277,999,000 in 2011. Maintaining and expanding opportunities to fish are expected to have positive cumulative effects on the economy at multiple scales.

This activity has shown no assessable environmental impact to the Refuge, its habitats, fish, or wildlife species. Concerns primarily center on the possibility of impacting sensitive non-target species through excessive disturbance. Visitor safety and law enforcement issues are also important. Providing restrictions that limit types of access to specific locations on the refuge will minimize disturbance and unsafe vehicle access. Disturbance to wildlife is limited to occasional flushing of non-target species during fishing activity. Fishing combined with other public activities and management actions will not cause cumulative impacts since most uses are separated by time and area. Adequate area exists for all uses to occur.

Fishing the Iowa River from IRCP lands will follow all applicable laws, regulations and policies; including, 50 CFR, National Wildlife Refuge System Manual, National Wildlife Refuge System goals and objectives, and Port Louisa NWR goals and objectives. This activity is also compliant with the purpose of the Refuge and the National Wildlife Refuge System Mission. Operating this activity does not alter the Refuge's ability to meet habitat goals, provides for the safety of the area's citizens, and supports several of the primary objectives of the Refuge.

Public Review and Comment:

This compatibility determination will be made available for a 30 day comment period along with the IRCP fishing environmental assessment. A notice was sent to local newspapers and posted at the Refuge office and DNR office.

Determination:

☐ Use is Not Compatible

☒ Use is Compatible with Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

To ensure compatibility with IRCP and Refuge purposes and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, fishing can occur on the Refuge if the following stipulations are met:

1. This use must be conducted in accordance with state and federal regulations, and special Refuge regulations published in the Federal Register.
2. This use is subject to modification if on-site monitoring by Refuge personnel or other authorized personnel results in unanticipated negative impacts to fisheries, natural communities, wildlife species, or their habitats.

Justification:

Fishing seasons, length, bag and possession limits are established by the state and adopted by the refuge on IRCP lands. These restrictions ensure the continued well-being of the river fishery. Fishing does result in the taking of many individuals within the overall population, but restrictions are designed to safeguard adequate populations from year to year. Specific Refuge regulations address equity and quality of opportunity for anglers, and help safeguard refuge and IRCP habitat. Disturbance to other fish and wildlife does occur, but this disturbance is generally short-term and adequate habitat exists throughout the IRCP. Loss of plants from boat or foot traffic is minor, or temporary, since submersed aquatic vegetation is limited in the Iowa River and bank fishing locations receive only moderate pressure.

Conflicts between anglers are localized and are addressed through law enforcement, public education, and continuous review and updating to state and refuge fishing regulations. Conflicts between other various user groups are minor given that uses typically occur in different areas and different times.

Stipulations above will ensure proper control of the means of use and provide management flexibility should detrimental impacts develop. Allowing this use also furthers the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System by providing renewable resources for the benefit of the American public while conserving fish, wildlife, and plant resources on the refuge.

References

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2006. Wildlife-Dependent Recreation: Hunting. 605 FW 2. National Wildlife Refuge System, Department of Interior. Available URL: <http://www.fws.gov/policy/605fw2.html>

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2011. 2011 National Survey of hunting, fishing, and wildlife-associated recreation.

Refuge Manager:

Catherine J. Henry

Date

Concurrence:

Kevin Foerster, Refuge Supervisor

Date

Regional Chief:

Tom Worthington, Acting Refuge Chief

Date

Mandatory 10-or 15 year Re-evaluations Date: 2022